DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 339 572 RC 018 411

AUTHOR Chance, Edward W.; And Others
TITLE Long Term Rural Superintendents: Characteristics and Attributes.
PUB DATE Oct 91
NOTE 22p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the National Rural Education Association (Jackson, MS, October 10-14, 1991).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Administrator Attitudes; *Administrator Characteristics; *Administrator Role; *Board Administrator Relationship; Boards of Education; Communication Skills; Elementary Secondary Education; Leadership Styles; Rural Schools; School Administration; *Superintendents; *Tenure

ABSTRACT

In order to identify factors enabling superintendents to maintain their position, this study examines characteristics of superintendents serving in the same Oklahoma rural school districts for 12 years or more, a tenure longer than the national average of 5 years. Twenty-four superintendents were identified and interviewed by telephone. Data covered three main areas: (1) demographic information; (2) information about the school board; and (3) professional information about the superintendents. All the superintendents were male, most were married and had children. The average length of service as superintendent in the district was 18 years. School board members had diverse occupations and most ran for the board due to their interest in children. Major issues reported were school reform and finances. Open communication was reported as the key to superintendent success. This research provides a limited look at why these superintendents have managed to stay in one school district for a relatively lengthy tenure. More research is needed on the topic of long-term superintendents. Interview questions were listed in the appendix. (LP)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED339572

LONG TERM RURAL SUPERINTENDENTS: CHARACTERISTICS AND ATTRIBUTES

Dr. Edward W. Chance
College of Education
University of Oklahoma
Norman, Oklahoma

Mr. Joe Ligon
Byng Public Schools
Byng, Oklahoma

Dr. Charles Butler
College of Education
University of Oklahoma

Mr. Rendell Cole
Sulphur Public Schools
Sulphur, Oklahoma

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Edward Chance

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

RC018411

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

ABSTRACT

This paper presents the results of a study of superintendents who have served in one school district for twelve years or more. Superintendents in twenty-four districts were identified and interviewed. The superintendents shared demographic information, insights into their school boards, and professional opinion. An open communication style was identified as a major reason for their individual success.

Long Term Rural Superintendents: Characteristics and Attributes

The role of the superintendent has changed dramatically over the years. Mirga (1985) stated that the superintendent has transformed from a fatherly, authority figure to a negotiator who primarily handles conflict. In other words, the time when the superintendent simply ruled the school is gone and now he/she constantly battles district employees and strives to stamp out fires of discontent before the district is engulfed. Gousha (1981) maintained that outside factors such as increased public access to the government, more independent political activism, less deference to authority, and a loss of confidence in institutions and leaders have changed the role of the school superintendent. Regardless of the reason, today's superintendency is quite different and perhaps more precarious than the role used to be.

Despite the difficulties in managing modern schools, there are superintendents who have maintained their positions much longer than the national or state average tenure for superintendent's. This is of some relevance in light of Yock's (1990) finding that the longer the superintendent has served in the school system, the more critical board members tend to become of his/her performance. Based on this finding, it would seem important to know more about superintendents that have managed to stay in one district for a relatively lengthy tenure.

Review of Literature

The length of tenure of all school superintendents has been decreasing for several years (McCarthy, 1990; and Shepherd, 1986). More specifically, nationally the superintendents' tenure now averages five years (Monteith, 1989). Cuban (1985) found examples of relatively short tenure in cities like New York,

Chicago, Cleveland, Boston, Seattle, and Denver which have each had three superintendents in less than five years.

The research on the average superintendent tenure, however, appears to be contradictory. Yock (1990) reported the findings of a survey of almost 12,000 board members. Of those surveyed, 82.6% said they were satisfied or very satisfied with their superintendent. Though this could mean that these board members were working with superintendents with five or fewer years in the district, the same survey revealed that 45.7% or the 12,000 board members thought that six to ten years was the ideal tenure for a superintendent and 13.9% thought that eleven to fifteen years was the ideal tenure (Yock, 1990). Also, the same research pointed out that school board members from large school systems are more pleased with their superintendents than those in small systems (Yock, 1990).

Shepherd (1986) stated that superintendencies are high risk employment opportunities. This high risk status is perhaps the result of, as Cuban (1985) maintained, conflict being the "DNA of the superintendency" (p. 28). Yet there are many superintendents who have successfully managed conflict. The American Association of School Administrators interviewed superintendents that had been successful in maintaining their positions in large, very difficult districts with a high level of conflict. These superintendents shared three characteristics: one, they had a mission to fulfill and were willing to lose their jobs over it; two, they believed that the school made a difference; and, three, they had a strong belief in the democratic process (Iannaccone, 1982).

McCarthy (1990) proposed that part of the reason for turnover in the superintendency was change on school boards. The more a school board's membership changes, the more likely the superintendent was to be replaced. School board membership turnover was not the only reason for superintendents

leaving their position. Monteith (1989), in her study of South Carolina superintendents, observed that pressure from the board and its interference with daily administrative functions were factors that superintendents indicated had a significant impact on their employment. Yock's (1990) survey of 12,000 board members identified three reasons that boards used for termination a superintendent: one, loss of confidence in the superintendent's integrity; two, loss of faith in the superintendent's leadership; and three, evidence of mismanagement of school finances. These findings are very similar to those found in a study of Oklahoma school board members (Chance & Capps, 1990). Grady and Bryant (1991) identified two basic areas in which superintendents were apt to get into trouble. These related to the people in a district and a failure to communicate. They found in a survey of Nebraska school board presidents that the most common cause of problems between boards and their superintendents was "poor people skills" (1991). In a mirror look at the same situation, Grady and Bryant (1991) also asked superintendents what was the major cause of turmoil. The overwhelming response identified relationship problems between the superintendent and the board. To sum up, being appointed chief school executive was the simplest step. Being able to remain as an effective, productive superintendent was the real challenge (Shepherd, 1986).

Yock (1990) submitted that the crucial leadership time for the superintendent occurs during the first four years. If a superintendent made it to the sixth year, he/she was likely to maintain the position indefinitely. Various researchers have provided several suggestions for superintendents so they may make it to the sixth year. First, regular communication between the board and the superintendent was critical for establishing a climate of cooperation (Freund, 1988). Freund also proposed that the best way for a superintendent to

work effectively with the school board was to deal with all members equally. Third, building stability in the board/superintendent relationship was an activity that took time and effort to maintain (Luehe, 1989; McCarthy, 1990). Finally, Weldman (1987) argued that to maintain their positions, superintendents must provide opportunities for school board member success and then celebrate that success with the board and the community.

Though the relationship between the school board and its superintendent is important, the superintendent's job performance was also important. Shepherd (1986) listed three strategies for survival in the superintendency: one, the superintendent must have a vision and be able to translate it into a plan; second, he/she must be able to survive in a political world; and, three, he/she should be able to apply the game of poker and know when to fold, hold, or run. Cuban (1985) envisioned the successful superintendent as one who accepts three simultaneous roles: politician, manager, and teacher. Shepherd (1986) perhaps best summed up the issue by asserting that unpredictable events and reactions and the ability to manage this unpredictability are crucial to prolonging the superintendent's employment.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The literature provided a foundation for the research problem. First, the average superintendent tenure is less than five years. Second, some superintendents are unable to deal effectively with the conflict, human and managerial, associated with the job. However, there are superintendents who have maintained their positions and have been productive in the position for longer than the national average of five years. The question is, what is it that enables certain superintendents to successfully maintain their jobs for lengthy periods of time when many of their peers do not. More specifically, what is it

that enables selected Oklahoma superintendents to maintain their position in the same district for twelve years or more.

METHODOLOGY

To begin the study, the researchers first had to establish a length of tenure in the same district that would qualify a person as a long-term superintendent. It was arbitrarily decided that twelve years in the same district would be the criterion. This length of service was more than twice the national average and it proved to be a useful discriminating factor in Oklahoma.

Secondly, the researchers had to establish which Oklahoma superintendents fit this tenure criteria. The Oklahoma State Department of Education was contacted to provide a list of superintendents who potentially had twelve years of service in the same district. This list however only reflected certification for the established time and not tenure in the same district as a superintendent. The researchers then used personal contacts within the state educational community to establish precisely which superintendents qualified for the study. Various educators recommended not only those who had been in the profession for twelve years or more but also those whom they respected as effective.

Third, the researchers divided the state into quadrants. Each researcher was responsible for a portion of the identified superintendents. The sample size was 24 superintendents (N=24). Six superintendents from each quadrant were selected randomly from those in that quadrant who met the established selection criterion.

Next, The researchers conducted telephone interviews with the selected superintendents. The interviews covered three main areas: demographic information; information about the school board; and, professional information

about the superintendent. Each interview consisted of the same 24 questions. A list of the questions appears in the appendix.

Finally, the results from the interviews were compiled. When applicable, the data were put through appropriate statistical calculation. Otherwise, the data were grouped and evaluated. The following section contains the results of the data.

RESULTS

Demographic Information

All of the 24 superintendents interviewed for this research were male. The vast majority were married and all but one had children. Twenty two or 91.6% were married and two were not. They had an average of 2.45 children with a range of none to five children. Twenty-one of the superintendents' had children who had graduated from high school.

Only three of the superintendents had served as the chief executive officer in another district. The remainder had served in some other capacity in their present district before becoming superintendent. The average length of service in the district was 25.95 years. The range of length of service in the district was 15 to 54 years. The average length of service as superintendent in the district was 17.79 years with a range of 12 to 28 years.

Only five of the twenty-four selected superintendents came to their current position form outside the district. The other nineteen (79%) had served in various positions in the district before becoming superintendents. Of these nineteen sixteen had been a building principal before becoming superintendent while three moved into the superintendency directly from the classroom. Of the

sixteen that had been promoted from the principalship, twelve had previously served as classroom teachers and/or coaches in the same district.

Board Information

All of the superintendents reported having five member school boards. Board members in the selected districts generally exhibited a significant record of service. Board members with the longest tenure on the board averaged 19.4 years of service with a range of ten to 44 years. Although ten superintendents reported having at least one new board member this year, board members with the shortest time on the board still averaged 3.16 years. Two superintendents indicated their "newest" board members had served for ten and twelve years.

The school board members had various occupations. These were grouped for organizational purposes. Of the 120 school board members (five members on each of 24 boards), 31.6% were involved in ranching and agriculture. Skilled laborers such as cabinet makers or machinists accounted for 17.5% of the board's membership. Sales people and professionals such as doctors and lawyers represented 9.2% of the board's population. Unskilled laborers and business owners made up 7.5% of the boards. Oil and gas workers (5.0%), state employees (3.0%), housewives (2.5%), clergy (.8%), retirees (2.5%), and educators from area vo-tech schools (3.3%) accounted for the remainder of the board members.

According to the superintendents' best calculations, they had an average of only 12.4 board members in the averaged 18 years they had served as superintendents. When five board members are subtracted from the average to allow for those serving when the superintendents began, the difference was an average of 7.04 new board members. the range of the number of board members serving during the superintendents' tenure is seven to 26 members.

There were some interesting responses to the question of why people ran for the board in the community. One superintendent stated, "They don't run for the board; they are appointed. We haven't had a board race in 28 years". Two superintendents admitted that people run for the board in their communities because "they have an ax to grind". The most frequent response given, however, was that those who ran for the board did so because they were interested in children or because "they care about school". Three superintendents believed that people ran for the board for the power or prestige that is associated with the position. One superintendent maintained that people ran for his board "for all the right reasons".

Board presidents on these 24 boards were selected in two ways. Presidents on four of the boards were selected on a rotating basis. The majority of board presidents, 83%, however, were elected each year by the board members. This yearly election does not indicate a new president is always selected. In fact, one superintendent revealed, "We have had the same problem for 24 years now".

All of the superintendents said they preferred board members to "go through the chain of command" when dealing with patron complaints. In other words, the superintendents wanted their board presidents to direct complaints or questions to the building principal first and then, if necessary, to the superintendent. They also stated that the patron could take the complaint to the board if he/she wasn't satisfied. One superintendent said that he also liked this chain of command but that he wanted his board members to always listen. He said, "I want them always to listen and discuss the problem but never [to] make promises or pass judgment". Another superintendent agreed with the "chain of command" approach because, as he put it, "Board members are only board members when they are at board meetings".

When asked what the major issues have been during the last year between the superintendent and the board, several of the respondents were rather hesitant. There seemed to be a misunderstanding in terminology and some of the superintendents thought the question was about conflict or problems. One superintendent, for example, was adamant when he replied, "We don't have any problems". However, when the confusion about definition was cleared up, almost 50% of the superintendents agreed that H.B. 1017 reforms were the major issue. Finances were a major issue for several districts. Two superintendents said that consolidation was a major issue and one felt that a declining student population was an important topic. The rest of the responses were varied, ranging from building programs to first year negotiations, to forming a foundation.

The responses to the follow-up question of "what have the major issues been between you and your board historically" were very similar to the responses to the previous question. Finance was a concern for 41% of the districts. Building programs and facilities expansion had been an issue in 33% of the districts. Two superintendents mentioned personnel in response to the question and five discussed curricular related subjects. One superintendent, in response to the query, responded simply, "Basketball uniforms".

Superintendent Information

The superintendents had varied responses as to why they had been so successful (defined in term of longevity) in their superintendencies. Almost all of the respondents mentioned "open communication" as the key to their longevity. In their relationships with the board, the superintendents said they had congenial, understanding board members who let the administrators run the school. The superintendents also mentioned the importance of keeping the members informed and keeping the office door open. In fact, eight of the twenty four

superintendents specifically mentioned that a stable school board was directly responsible for their longevity in the district. One superintendent said he didn't know why he had been able to stay in the district and another one attributed his success to his work ethic. "I'm here every day," was his concise reply.

In their relationships with their communities, the superintendents thought open communication was again the key to their success. At least three superintendents credited the community for their success. Public relations was an identified key for three superintendents. One responded, "They (the community) know me and they know what to expect". Another superintendent said the "good ol' boy syndrome" in the community was the reason that he had been able to retain his position. Finally, another superintendent maintained that he had been successful with the community because, "I have stayed away from the coffee shops".

Most of the superintendents believed that their success with their school employees was based on the employee being "good people". They also asserted that open communication with school personnel was an important attribute. One superintendent stated that involving a lot of people was the key and another felt that creating a sense of belonging was the important factor. Opportunities for advancement and a willingness to promote was one superintendent's response. And, finally, one indicated, "If new employees will listen to us and do what we tell them, they will stay here until they retire".

The superintendents had some interesting advice for new superintendents. The advice ranged from the practical: "find the right situation in the right community and stay put", to the unusual: "always disseminate important information in group meetings; never tell individuals". However, the most common

advice was that new superintendents needed to strive to communicate with the board, the staff, and the community. Three of the superintendents maintained that the most important thing a new superintendent could do was to keep the board informed. Three others stated that a knowledge of school finance was the most important thing a new superintendent could bring to a district.

The number of administrators that these superintendent have had working for them during their tenure in the district was very revealing. The average number of administrators was 6.21 during the average 17.79 years. However, if the responses of the superintendents of the larger districts with multiple sites are not considered, the average number of administrators falls to 4.61. The range of administrators working for these superintendents is one to 26. However, two superintendents reported having only one administrator during their tenure and four reported having only two administrators. In response to why to one superintendent had had relatively few administrators, he said, "They've grown up in the system".

When asked to describe themselves as leaders, the vast majority of superintendents simply laughed or said, "I don't know". However, when questioned more closely, their responses varied. Five of the superintendents said they utilized their personnel to run the school. One stated that he leads by doing and another classified himself as visionary. On the other hand, one superintendent said his leadership depended upon his attitude at the time and one of his peers said, rather bluntly, that he was a sorry leader. Oddly enough, as a whole, these men were quite taken aback when asked about their leadership style.

Finally, the superintendents were asked what they saw as the future of rural education. As a whole, they were optimistic but several mentioned

consolidation and 25% of the respondents referred to technology as the way to increase course offerings in rural high schools. H.B. 1017 the Oklahoma Education Reform bill was also mentioned several times but opinions about the legislation were varied. Some thought the reforms would be hard on rural schools but one administrator declared, "Rural education has a good future and 1017 will make it stronger". Another superintendent quite candidly stated, "the future of rural education depends upon who our governor is". Another one warned, "The future of rural education can be good if the state legislature lets us have a future".

CONCLUSIONS

The results of this research is varied but useful. At times, the responses of these 24 superintendents appeared to contradict portions of the literature while at other times the responses and literature agreed. Regardless of the correlation between what these superintendents said and what the literature maintained, the data are still important.

The superintendent that has survived in the same district for twelve years or more is an exception to the average maintained nationally by superintendents. The 24 superintendents who participated in this research project proved to be "school men" who understood their school districts.

Averaging and drawing composites tend to erase extremes. However, a composite of these 24 superintendents is helpful in understanding their uniqueness.

The composite superintendent is a male who is married and has two children who have graduated from high school. He has worked in the district for 26 years and has served as superintendent there for 18 of those years. He has been a classroom teacher and a building principal in the same district of which he is

now superintendent. He has never been superintendent in any other district. He sees himself as a very fortunate man who works for a good school board, works with good, dedicated people, and lives in a fine community. He is at once proud of the stability in the district and humbled by his contributions to this stability.

He works for five board members with whom he is well-acquainted. The board members are most likely involved in agriculture or are skilled laborers. Almost all of them are male. Board members serve mainly because they are interested in the school and in the children. Many of them have served for several years and there is seldom a turnover on the board. These board members understand their function and allow the administrators to operate the school.

The superintendent and board seldom have internal conflict. However, there are always issues that require their attention. During the past year, they have dealt with finances and H.B. 1017. Over the past several years they have had to make decisions about financial issues and building programs.

The superintendent is optimistic and realistic. He knows that the future for rural education will be challenging but he also believes rural education is here to stay. He realizes that his future is very much based upon the whims of elected state officials. But he understands the importance of education and is willing to work hard to insure another successful year.

It is amazing how stable these school districts appear. They've had the same superintendents for many years; they've had the same building administrators for several years; and they've had the same people on the board for an extended period of time. The question that comes to mind is: is the superintendent responsible for the stability of the district or is the district responsible for the superintendent's stability?

It is also interesting how similar these men seem to be. They seem to share the same goals. They have basically the same responses to difficult questions. And they run their schools about the same way. Another question comes to mind: did these superintendents mold the district or did they inherit a district that shapes them?

These superintendents appear to contradict much of what the literature states (McCarthy, 1990). For example, superintendent tenure is declining while these men seem secure in their positions. And the issue of conflict didn't arise in any of the interviews (Cuban, 1985; Grady & Bryant, 1990).

Finally, some of the literature does appear to describe these men. Based on the superintendents' longevity, the school board members must be relatively satisfied with the superintendents' performance. The superintendents believed that their school makes a difference (Iannaccone, 1982). And these men have made it past the first four crucial years and now appear to be in the district indefinitely (Yock, 1990).

This research provides a very limited look at some very unique and successful individuals. Although the results are interesting, there are many questions left unanswered. Hopefully, the topic of long-term superintendents will continue to receive more attention.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Barnett, Mark, (1982). Perceptions of the leadership style: effectiveness of superintendents in Mississippi. New Orleans, LA: Mid-South Educational Research Association. (ERIC Document Reproduction Services No. ED 242 087).

Chance, Edward W. & Capps, James L. (1990). Administrator Stability in Rural Schools: The School Board Factor. Unpublished manuscript University of Oklahoma, Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, Norman, OK.

Cuban, Larry. (1985, September). Conflict and leadership in the superintendency. Phi Delta Kappan, 67, 28-30.

Grady, Marilyn L. & Miles T. Bryant. (1991, February). School board turmoil and superintendent turnover: What pushes them to the brink? The School Administrator, 48, 19-26.

Grady, Marilyn L. & Miles T. Bryant. (1991, May). School board presidents tell why their superintendents fail. The Executive Educator, 24-25.

Gousha, Richard. (1981). What's happening to superintendents? Atlanta GA: American Association of School Administrators. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 204845).

Freund, Sidney A. (1988, June). Here's how I stay friends with the board president. The American School Board Journal, 175, 39.

Iannaccone, Laurence. (1982, September). Superintendents make a difference. The School Administrator, 38, 16-17.

Katz, Malcolm. (1985, February). Match working styles and find you way to board/superintendent harmony. The American School Board Journal, 33-34.

Luehe, Bill. (1989, October). Fine-tuning keeps board/superintendent relations on track and running smoothly. The American School Board Journal, 176, 33+.

McCarthy, Robert. (1990, April). Consultant as coaches. The American School Board Journal, 177, 26-27.

Mirga, Tom. (1985, February). The high-pressure world of superintendents. Education Week, 20, 31-32.

Monteith, Dianne S., & Hallums, Mary, (1989). The Exodus of South Carolina Superintendents. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 311 531).

Shepard, Greta. (1986). Survival Strategies and the Superintendency. San Francisco, CA: American Educational Research Association. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 270 848).

Wildman, Louis. (1987). What can superintendents and Board Members Do to help Each Other be Successful? San Diego, CA: National Council of States on Inservice Education. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 294 312).

Yock, C., Keough, K.E., Underwood, K.E., & Fortune, J.C. (1990, January). Happily Ever After. The American School Board Journal, 177, 28-35.

APPENDIX

APPENDIX

QUESTIONNAIRE

Demographic Information

*How long have you worked in this district?
X=25.95 Range--54 to 15 years

*How long have you been superintendent in this district?
X=17.79 Range--28 to 12 years

*Have you worked in any other position in this district?
Yes--91.6% No--8.4%

Do you have children? (If yes, are they in or out of school?)
X-2.45 children Range--5 to 0 87% are out of school

Board Information

*How many members serve on your board?
5

*How many years has the board member with the longest time on your board served?
X=19.41 Range--44 to 10 years

*How many years has the board member with the shortest time on your board served?
X=3.16 Range 1 to 12 years

*What are the occupation of your board members?
31.6% ranching/agriculture 17.5% skilled laborers 9.2% professionals
9.2% sales people 7.5% unskilled laborers 7.5% business owners

*How many board members have you had in the time you've been superintendent in this district?
X=12.04

*Why do you think people run for the board in your community?

*How are your board presidents selected?

*How would you describe the board's role in your school?

*How do you prefer your board to communicate with the community in relation to patron complaints?

*What have the major issues been between you and your board during the last year?

*What have the major issues been between you and your board historically?

Superintendent Information

*What do you see as the major reason(s) for your success (longevity)?
With the board--
With the community--
With the school employees--

*What do you see as the one thing that has enabled you to remain as superintendent of this district?

*What one piece of advice would you give to a new superintendent?

*How would you describe yourself as a leader?

*How many administrators have you had working for you during you tenure in this district?
X=6.21 Range--26 to 1 administrators

*What do you see as the future of rural education?